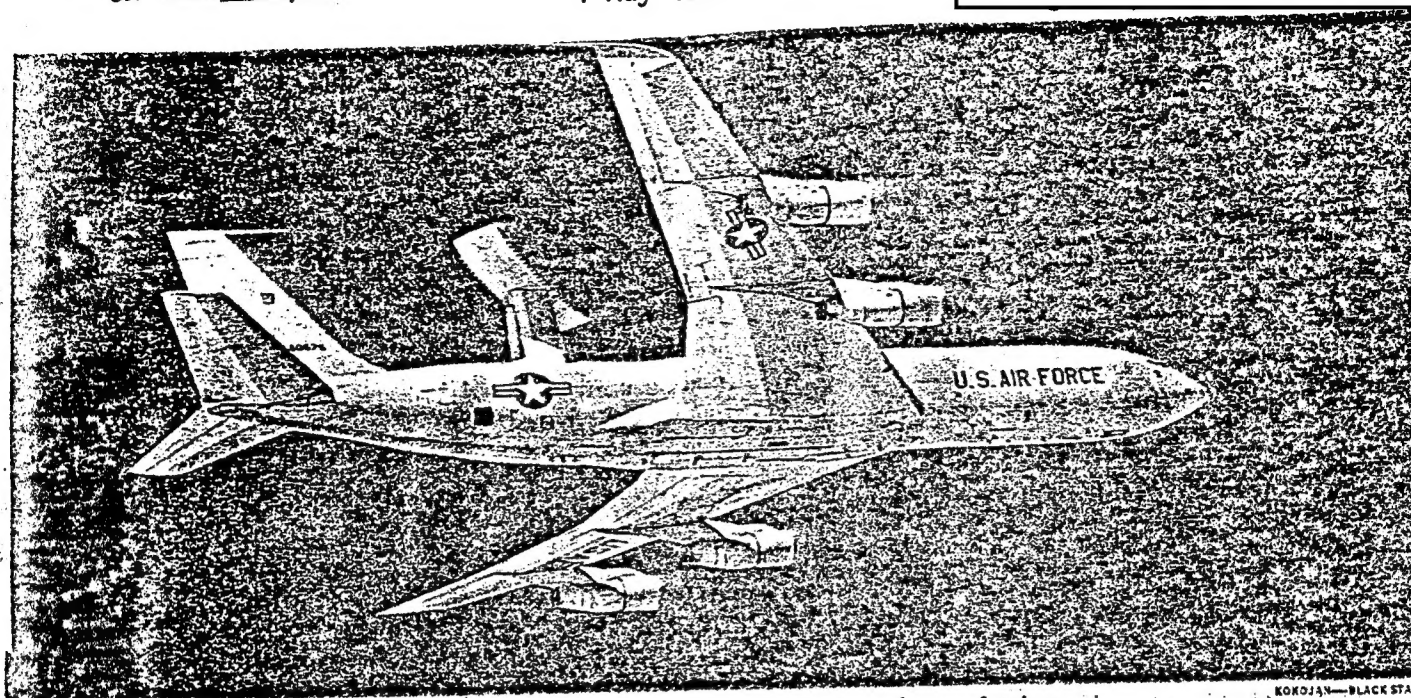


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Focus of the uproar: AWACS-equipped E-3A Sentry in flight, showing radar-controlling rotodome on fuselage

KOKOJAN—BLACK STAR

TIME/MAY 4, 1981

Flying into Trouble

Selling AWACS: dubious militarily and dangerous politically

At first it looked like a shrewd way to expand U.S. influence in oil-rich, pro-Western Saudi Arabia, without unduly roiling its troubled near neighbor Israel. But by last week the prospective deal had turned into something of an Arabian nightmare. By spelling out just what would be included in \$5 billion worth of modern weaponry, which he intends to sell to the Saudis, Ronald Reagan set a time bomb ticking toward an explosive congressional battle over his foreign policy.

At issue are five E-3A AWACS, converted Boeing 707s with an awesome array of supersophisticated radar and electronics equipment (see box). The White House confirmed last week that the AWACS (price with supporting equipment: \$2.5 billion) would be included in the arms sale, with delivery beginning in 1985. Moreover, the White House said, the sale would be presented to Congress as a single package. Thus legislators who approve the sale of less controversial items, such as Sidewinder missiles and fuel tanks to double the range of F-15 fighters already ordered by the Saudis but have their doubts about AWACS will be unable to duck the issue; they will have to cast specific yes or no votes on the AWACS sale.

The announcement fanned into flame

opposition that began smoldering in early March, when it became clear that the Administration was indeed likely to include the AWACS in the arms sale. Israeli officials initially expressed little more than token opposition to the sale, but they have been convinced by the country's military leaders that AWACS in Saudi hands could lay bare all of Israel's military secrets to Arab enemies. Prime Minister Menachem Begin reacted to the sale announcement last week by giving U.S. Ambassador Samuel Lewis a memorable private tongue-lashing. Labor Party Leader Shimon Peres, Begin's major opponent in the June 30 Israeli elections, denounced the U.S. decision as "dangerous to the peace process and security of the region." Deputy Defense Minister Mordechai Zippori pledged that Israel would take its case "to the American people"—a clear signal to the lobby of U.S. Jewish organizations to mount a full-court press on Congress to block the sale.

Many Congressmen need no great urging. Democratic Whip Alan Cranston of California counted a majority of 51 Senators opposed to any AWACS sale; 46 already have gone on record against it. So have 78 Representatives, and House leaders say a majority probably is opposed. Moreover, the opposition includes not

only traditional Democratic friends of Israel but staunchly conservative Republicans who are stalwart Reaganites on most other issues. Concedes a senior Reagan political adviser: "As of today, the Saudi deal would not get through Congress."

Reagan, however, is not expected to submit the proposed sale for congressional approval until September. By law, the President must first officially notify Congress of his intention to make the sale, then follow within 20 days with a formal proposal. After that, Congress has 30 days during which it can reject the sale, by majority vote of both Houses. Thus seven weeks of battle could elapse between first submission and final vote.

During the interval the Administration hopes to negotiate restrictions on how the Saudis can use the planes. These guarantees might allay the fears of some congressional supporters of Israel, and put pressure on Republicans who have misgivings about the sale but are equally dismayed by the thought of handing their President a major foreign policy defeat.

Even if those tactics work, however, the outlook is for a protracted struggle from which it is difficult to see the Administration emerging with any great gains.